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*Construire la légitimité et l'autorité politiques en discours*

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# Constructing political legitimacy and authority in discourse

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Ruth Amossy

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## Introduction

- 1 How are political legitimacy and authority constructed in discourse? These two notions have undoubtedly been the subject of countless scholarly works in the social sciences, some of which have become essential references. It suffices to mention some of the most famous: Max Weber (1965, 2003), Hannah Arendt (1972 [1957]), Jürgen Habermas (1975, 1996), Pierre Bourdieu (1982), Alexandre Kojève (2004), Pierre Rosanvallon (2008), David Beetham (2013)—in-depth studies to which we can add an abundant scholarly production in sociology, political science, philosophy. Language sciences feed on these resources, but their harvest is less rich. There are, however, some excellent theoretical works such as those of Patrick Charaudeau (2005, 2015), Marc Angenot's monumental *Rhétorique de la confiance et de l'autorité* (2013), Claire Oger's research on authority (2013, 2021), and in the Anglo-Saxon field studies in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA): Teun van Dijk (1997), Theo van Leeuwen (with his influential article "Legitimation and Discourse in Communication", 2007), Ruth Wodak (1999 with van Leeuwen, 2020 with Rheindorf) or Fairclough and Fairclough (2008). Rhetoric provides studies on *ethos* as a means for the speaker to confer on himself the authority necessary for any enterprise of persuasion; some other rhetorical trends examine the construction of legitimacy in the context of organizations or institutions. But even if we draw on these sources, many unresolved questions remain when trying to grasp the modalities of legitimacy and authority construction in political discourse.
- 2 They stem in part from a relative indifference between the notions of legitimacy and authority, or at least from the tendency to conflate them. At the same time, they stem from the fact that the emphasis in theoretical elaborations and concrete analyses is placed either on legitimacy or on authority, so that in both cases, one is subordinated

to the other and sometimes encompassed in it. The present reflection attempts to clarify and to disentangle somewhat the two notions often used in a very fluid way, and to examine how their construction is carried out. This clarification should not only shed light on the way they are worded, but also identify the socio-discursive issues they raise in situated political discourses.

- 3 To address this issue, we will first take a quick look at the concepts involved—legitimacy and authority, legitimation and the construction of authority—by examining their nature and their complex interrelationship. We will then try to identify, based on a corpus composed of the first speeches of the leaders of democratic countries on Covid-19, the discursive and argumentative modalities according to which it is possible for the heads of state to build their legitimacy and their authority in a period of crisis where it is particularly fragile, and more necessary than ever. This will allow us to identify an open set of procedures that participate in this verbal construction.

## 1. On political legitimacy and legitimation

### 1.1. Democratic legitimacy

- 4 First, a return to the notion of political legitimacy is necessary. The study of the procedures that construct it in discourse—the “legitimation” on which DA (Charaudeau and Maingueneau [2002: 340] and the CDA focus—is necessarily dependent on the definition that we provide. However, we can see from the scholarly literature on the subject that it is the subject of numerous considerations that diverge significantly (Bouquet 2014).
- 5 Thus, the lexicographical definitions in English dictionaries enumerate a series of meanings that are not necessarily relevant to political legitimacy although they are frequent in everyday language. Such a polysemy contributes to the indeterminacy and excessive generality of the notion. The Merriam-Webster dictionary, for example, mentions: (1) lawfully begotten, born in wedlock; (2) being exactly as intended or presented: neither spurious nor false; (3) accordant with law or with established legal forms and requirements—a *legitimate* government and conforming to recognized principles or accepted rules and standards; for the Merriam-Webster, *legitimate* is synonym not only of “fair” but also of “valid” and “reasonable”. We can see that the wide range of meanings attached to the term, and the high degree of generality conferred upon some of these meanings (such as authentic, valid, reasonable), makes it difficult to understand the specificity of the notion in the political field. It seems that definition 3 is closest to the topic. It is however important to emphasize that legal is not always legitimate, not because it is not logically valid, but mainly because it does not respect moral standards and principles. Thus, the *Trésor de la langue française*, after the definition “Conformity of the political power exercised with the rules of sovereignty, with the exercise of power in the country concerned,” specifies: “conformity of something, a state, an act, with equity, natural law, reason, morality” (my translation).
- 6 A professional dictionary of law provides a more developed, and more useful, definition:  
“Legitimacy” is the conformity to a higher principle that in a society and at a given time is considered just. The notion of legitimacy does not cover that of legality,

which is more restricted and characterizes what is only in conformity with the Law. The notion of legitimacy is contingent on culture [...] (Serge Braudo, *Dictionnaire du droit privé* [Dictionary of Private Law], online, 1996-2021<sup>1</sup>—my translation).

- 7 And again, in the *Critical and Interdisciplinary Dictionary of Participation* (Hatzfeld 2012):

Legitimacy is the right of a person (or of several persons) to speak and act in the name of principles, values, rules, laws... By its etymology (from the Latin *lex, legis*: law), legitimacy is close to legality, but it differs from it by its meaning: legality consists in applying a law, while legitimacy draws on principles which, in some cases, may be in contradiction with law. The principles on which legitimacy is based are of a varied nature: moral and political principles, habits, rights, norms... The hierarchy of these principles varies according to individuals and societies, it is the source of many differences<sup>2</sup> (my translation).

- 8 Some Discourse analysts point to aspects of legitimacy that are consistent with these views, while highlighting other important features such as recognition. We can thus read in *Le discours politique* (Charaudeau 2005: 52) that legitimacy is the “result of a recognition by others of what gives someone power to do or say in the name of a *status*.” In the field of CDA, Rojo and van Dijk note that the recognition necessary to gain legitimacy is obtained “through strategies that aim to show that [the actions] are consistent with the moral order of society, that is, with the system of laws, norms, agreements or aims agreed upon by (the majority of) the citizens” (1997: 528).
- 9 The following elements can be retained from these definitions:

—the distinction between the well-defined field of legality, and the broader principle of legitimacy which may overlap with the legal but is not limited to it (and may even oppose it);

—the necessary conformity of legitimacy with a set of consensual values and norms;

—the fact that legality is attached to the letter of the law, while legitimacy also depends on cultural and political factors;

—the idea that legitimacy implies recognition;

—the subsequent idea that legitimacy refers to a relationship between those who claim it and those who must recognize it;

—the idea that, because of this relational link and this dependence on diversified and changing principles, it cannot be fixed in an absolute way, so that it can give rise to evolutions and dissensions.

- 10 These various elements have been conceptualized by theorists who are mainly involved in the fields of law, political philosophy and the social sciences. Legal scholars are primarily concerned with questions of legal validity, philosophers with conformity with moral principles that can be justified in the light of reason, in other words with the justification of power relations. However, according to David Beetham (2013), there is an important difference between moral or political philosophers and sociologists. The former examine the issue from a normative perspective of a universal type, while the latter conceive of it only in descriptive terms and in context. Social scientists

consider that legitimacy can vary from one society or era to another, and consequently they do not set absolute standards to which every man of reason should adhere.

- 11 Beetham rejects Max Weber's principle according to which legitimacy depends on the involved agents' belief in it: "A given power relationship is not legitimate because people believe in its legitimacy, but because it can be *justified in terms of* their beliefs. This may seem a fine distinction, but it is a fundamental one." (2013: 11) According to him, when assessing political legitimacy, we are "making an assessment of the degree of congruence, or lack of it, between a given system of power and the beliefs, values and expectations that provide its justification" (*ibid.*). In addition, for Beetham, the approach of the social sciences focuses on the empirical consequences of legitimacy: it has the capacity of determining behaviors—in this case, of eliciting the obedience of the governed. This approach provides a valuable key to understanding the relationship between legitimacy and authority, which we will return to later.
- 12 Here is the way Beetham (2013: 18-19) summarizes what is needed for a power to be considered legitimate. It is necessary for it: 1. to conform to established rules (under penalty of being illegitimate); 2. that the rules can be justified by references to shared beliefs (otherwise it suffers from a lack of legitimacy); 3. that power be expressly recognized by acts that mark this recognition (when there is non-cooperation, resistance, disobedience, etc., there is delegitimization). These three complementary levels (that of rules, "justifiability" in terms of beliefs, and consent of the governed) are never totally realized; legitimacy is a matter of degree, it can be eroded, challenged or incomplete (*ibid.*: 20). But in any case, those elements are the ones that offer the governed the moral foundations for their cooperation with the rulers.<sup>3</sup>
- 13 The work of Pierre Rosanvallon adds two interesting elements to these theoretical elaborations regarding contemporary democratic regimes. First, the political scientist notes an additional vector of legitimacy of the leader and his or her decisions that is characteristic of our time: it concerns the conception of the common good in the service of which the rulers must place themselves, and which confers on power the justification of its legitimacy. According to Rosanvallon, this notion, initially anchored in that of the majority, has been transformed insofar as the people no longer appear as "a homogeneous mass": "Society now manifests itself in the form of a vast declension of minority conditions" (Rosanvallon 2008: 14; my translation). The legitimacy of the politician would then depend on his or her capacity to take into account the plural expressions of the common good.
- 14 Legitimacy also involves an assessment of the right of the leader to represent the citizens, based on an assessment of his or her ability to understand the problems of the people s/he governs. We can then speak with Rosanvallon of a "legitimacy of proximity". This is the result not of a mode of election but of a behavior translated into words and deeds. The general requirement of representativeness gave way to a "representation-empathy" that Rosanvallon classifies under the heading of the "politics of presence" (*ibid.*: 297). In other words, the legitimacy of proximity is linked to the need for leaders to listen and show solidarity with those who, suffering extremely difficult trials, feel that they are not listened to nor cared for. Democratic generality is then expressed in terms of solicitude, compassion, even redemption of a denial of existence. In a similar perspective, Le Bart and Lefèvre (2005: § 1) note: "Proximity is considered a safe social value in a world thought to be without landmarks, impersonal, anomic, complex [...] Through the valorization of proximity

relations, it is the verticality of social relations that is contested” (my translation). The existence of a horizontal mode of relationship that replaces, or at least complements, the vertical relationship of power introduces an interesting variant into legitimation procedures.

## 1.2. The legitimation process

- 15 In the discursive perspective adopted here, it is not legitimacy itself but the process of its construction that is at stake. It is possible to emphasize, as Pierre Bourdieu (1982) does, the preponderance of institutional status which confers on an individual legitimacy and ensures its recognition by the public. Traditionally, in a democracy, elections by universal suffrage appoint a representative of the people responsible for looking after the general interest and are the warrants of his or her legitimacy. They thus guarantee the legitimacy of his/her discourses and acts, as well as of the political line announced in accordance with the main principles of the democratic regime in question. However, as Charaudeau aptly remarks, when speaking of what he calls “legitimacy by mandate” in representative democracies, the sovereignty it grants “constantly needs to be reactivated by various justifications because it can be questioned by the very people who granted it.” (2005: 57; my translation) In the same vein, Rosanvallon notes that in the era of the withdrawal of ideologies, the election that enthrones the leader has a reduced part: it is content to “validate a mode of appointment of the rulers” (2008: 21), without implying an automatic legitimation of the policies carried out thereafter. It follows that the government elected by the majority enjoys an “*imperfect legitimacy*” which always remains subject to greater constraints of justification, and which needs “to be reinforced by other modes of democratic legitimation” (*ibid.*: 29; emphasis added; my translation).
- 16 In this perspective legitimation refers to the process by which the necessarily imperfect legitimacy of leaders attempts to express itself and to be recognized. It is a discursive dynamic. According to Rojo and van Dijk (1997: 528), the aim of the legitimation discourse is to have the ruler’s policy recognized as obeying the established rules and as being motivated by the search for the public good, *i.e.* to have it recognized as legally and morally defensible in the circumstances. The success of this process does not only guarantee the approval of the measures proposed or dictated by the power, but it extends to the rulers, their position and their leadership. In other words, we are dealing with a verbal procedure that consolidates an institutionally granted legitimacy that needs to be reaffirmed and strengthened. Rojo and van Dijk add that it is particularly necessary “in contexts of controversial actions, accusations, doubts, critique or conflicts over group relations, domination and leadership” (*ibid.*). It is even more mobilized in situations designated by the well-known expression “crisis of legitimacy” introduced by Habermas (1975), which reflects a fall in the confidence granted to the institutions in place and to the leaders in power. In all these cases, legitimation as a discursive dynamic can take the form of ostentatious manifestation and recall, or consolidation and (partial) restoration.
- 17 It is to the extent that it calls for justification, namely for reasons, that legitimation participates in argumentation. In *Political Discourse Analysis* (2012), I. and N. Fairclough insist on the importance of placing the study of political legitimacy within the framework not only of Discourse Analysis but also of argumentation,—otherwise “the

exact nature of legitimation remains a mystery” (*ibid.*: 110). At the same time, they note that one must be careful not to dissolve legitimation into the overall notion of argumentation. According to them, CDA has given legitimation far too broad a meaning. It has been equated with the overall concept of justification, *i.e.* of any reason given to support an action. However, legitimation has a narrower meaning: the type of justification achieved by legitimation differs from others in that it invokes

publicly shared and publicly justifiable, and sometimes highly formalized, codified, institutional systems of beliefs, values and norms, in virtue of which the action proposed is considered legitimate. Justifications for action which do not invoke such shared systems of rules or shared norms cannot be properly said to be legitimation (*ibid.*: 109).

- 18 In short, while any legitimation is based on justification, not every process of justification is legitimation. This position has practical consequences on the analysis of political discourses and on its methods, explaining why the approach we develop here at the crossroad of DA and rhetorical argumentation does not fully adopt, despite its benefits and its success, the grid established by van Leeuwen (2007) and van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999) (and mobilized by Wodak in this very volume).

## 2. The question of authority in discourse

### 2.1. Authority in relation to legitimacy

- 19 Like legitimacy, the notion of authority has been much studied in different fields of knowledge. Marc Angenot notes: “The word is eminently polysemic and the various meanings overlap and entangle” (2013: 8, my translation). We will seek here to clarify political authority, as distinguished from power, in all situations where the leader must have his/her decisions accepted and ensure their practical realization. At the same time, we will try to revisit in this framework the relationship between legitimacy and authority, two notions so closely intertwined on the theoretical and practical level that it is often difficult to disentangle them.
- 20 Authority is globally defined as the power to act on others. For Kojève, “Authority is the possibility that an agent has to act on others (or on another), without these others reacting on him, while being able to do so” (2004: 58; my translation). Authority is thus the ability to be listened to and obeyed, but it is important to emphasize that it is an obedience in which men keep their freedom (Arendt 1972: 140). In other words, authority differs from the mere exercise of power in that it arouses a consented submission: “we must be careful not to conflate power and authority, or authority and domination,” Claire Oger writes in her recent essay on authority (2021: 15). This authority (to be distinguished from authoritarianism) is “a symbolic force that can do without coercion” (Angenot 2013: 8) and not “a ‘violence’ that forces submission” (*ibid.*: 15; my translation). It is because it is supported by reasons, because it is arguable (even if it is not explicitly argued) that we can speak, following Angenot, of rhetorical authority. In the political field, “it is the authority that, if necessary, allows power, powers to be exercised without the use of force” (*ibid.*: 13).
- 21 However, this definition of authority cannot be dissociated from its relationship to legitimacy. First, let us repeat that the two notions should be distinguished:
- We will not confuse [...] *legitimacy* and *authority*. The first [...] is an acquired right. Authority, on the other hand, is intrinsically linked to the process of submission of



the other. It places the subject in a position that allows him to obtain from others a behavior (to make them do) or conceptions (to make them think and say) that they would not have without his intervention. Legitimacy does not put the subject who is endowed with it in a situation of having to submit the other (Charaudeau 2005: 52).

- 22 However, in a democracy, the authority that calls for consented submission necessarily relies on recognized legitimacy. Beetham shows that it is legitimacy that provides a moral foundation for the demand for obedience and cooperation: “To the extent that people acknowledge power as rightful, as validly acquired and properly exercised, they will feel a corresponding obligation to obey and support it without having to be bribed or coerced into doing so.” (2013: xi) In other words, it is the legal and moral legitimacy recognized as such that makes it possible to exercise consented authority. Undoubtedly, in the absence of legitimacy or when it is undermined, obedience as submission to power can be imposed through sanctions (authority then becomes authoritarianism). But, as Beetham points out, the use of force must then become pervasive, considerable resources are devoted to it; and this power, which is no longer based on legitimacy, can be dismantled at any time as soon as the system of coercion weakens.
- 23 It is in this perspective that “authority is generally considered by sociologists as a legitimate power: a power that therefore needs only a minimum of coercion to be respected and obeyed” (Coenen-Huther 2005). And Angenot summarizes: “Authority is legitimized power” (2013: 8). Thus, authority is based on legitimacy but is in some way an extension of it; and legitimacy leads to authority as the capacity to be obeyed voluntarily but is not to be confused with it. We know from experience that a leader can be recognized as legitimate without being able to be listened to and obeyed.

## 2.2. The discursive construction of authority: a question of *ethos*

- 24 What then does it take for the authority of the legitimate leader to exercise itself? The ability to be heard and obeyed stems largely from the credibility of his or her discourse, and from the trust that can be placed in both the speech and the person of the leader.
- 25 A clarification on the notion of trust is needed at this point. It is no coincidence that Marc Angenot’s book is entitled *Rhétorique de la confiance et de l’autorité* (2013). Boudon and Bourricault’s *Dictionnaire de la sociologie* specifies: “We speak of the authority of a person, of an institution, of a message”, “to signify that they are trusted; that their opinion, suggestion or injunction are accepted with respect, favor, or at least without hostility or resistance, and that people are willing to comply with it” (1982: 32; my translation). Regarding authority, Angenot does not however speak of trust between peers, but of “unequal” trust between “two bodies of different status”; such an unequal trust is necessary when, in a situation calling for an answer or a solution, the individual recognizes “the impossibility, or at least the excessive cost that would derive from seeking it of oneself” (2013: 19; my translation). He then turns to the person who has knowledge, skills, experience that justify relying on him. Trust is purely relational; it emerges when the audience believes that the speaker is reliable and can be believed.
- 26 It is probably necessary to differentiate between “impersonal confidence in the reliability of institutions” and the trust that stems “from the virtues attributed to the person who holds a certain position of power” (Origgi 2008: 80-81). One could say that the trust granted to institutions (partly) conditions the recognition of political



legitimacy. Citizens must have confidence in the institutions of their country so that they accept as legitimate, namely as founded in law and morality, all that emanates from them at the legal and executive levels. Widespread distrust of the system—accused, for example, of corruption or favoritism—undermines the legitimacy of power. In this case, the leader must even more be recognized as a ruler respectful of the public good and democratic values. However, to come back to Charaudeau's formulation, the recognition of the right to say and to do does not necessarily entail the capacity of making others say and do (of obtaining voluntary obedience). The trust that conditions authority presupposes the intimate conviction of the competence of the speaker, of the righteousness of his judgment as well as of the purity of his intentions. Trust in a man or woman in power therefore implies credibility. But authority, as Michèle Monte and Claire Oger point out, “must not dissolve into mere credibility” (2015: 6). Just as Angenot speaks of trust between two bodies of different status, so Claire Oger explains that authority “is based on an *increase in credibility* [...], and on a position of hierarchical superiority [...] organizing an asymmetrical ratio of places” (2013: 42). This increase in credibility in a non-symmetrical relationship manifests itself in the construction of an appropriate *ethos*. It is no coincidence that “the old rhetoric linked, and even confused, credibility and the *ethos* of the speaker [...] *Ethos* is the moral credibility recognized to the person who speaks, it is due to his honesty no less than to his competence and prudence” (Angenot 2013: 73; my translation).

- 27 In addition to the discursive image that endows the speaker with authority, it is important to take into consideration his prior *ethos* (Amossy 2010), namely, the representation that the public has of his or her person at the time s/he speaks, and which can strongly influence the credit that is attributed to him or to her. If this previous image is damaging, it is up to the speaker to rework it, to repair it, or simply to adapt it to the needs of the moment. We can thus speak of a re-elaboration of *ethos* (Amossy 2010) or, in extreme cases, of image repair (Kerber-Sadoun 2018).
- 28 The legitimate political person endowed with an authority that allows him or her to call for the consented obedience of the citizens is not exempted from persuading the audience that each of his or her decisions and measures are credible; s/he must justify the merits of his or her political line. That the discourse emanates from a source worthy of trust is not enough if the instructions do not seem reasonable in the eyes of a being of reason as defined in a given socio-historical and political context. It is on this condition that citizens can believe in their relevance and in the effectiveness of their implementation. One does not voluntarily obey instructions considered absurd and without effect, whatever the source. One does not feel obliged to voluntarily acquiesce to an instruction that is not justified and can therefore be judged arbitrary. If the *ethos* of the speaker influences the credibility of his or her speech, the plausibility of this speech is nevertheless in constant need of justification. It in turn reflects on the public image of the leader: it testifies to an ability to govern.

### 3. Discursive and argumentative analysis

#### 3.1. Methodological remarks

- 29 Let us see now how these considerations can translate into concrete analysis. While drawing on the pioneering contributions of the CDA, we will not confine ourselves to

their framework. Thus, we will not ground our analysis in the protocol of van Leeuwen (2007), developed with Wodak (1999), even though it has become a reference in the field. There are several reasons for it, as suggested above. The first is the little interest van Leeuwen pays to argumentation in his study of legitimation (as Fairclough and Fairclough point out<sup>5</sup>). The speaker must obtain recognition of his legitimacy, always in need of confirmation and sometimes, when it is questioned, in need of recovery—an undertaking that lies *par excellence* in the field of argumentation. The second point relates to the very broad extension that van Leeuwen, but also Rojo and van Dijk, give to the notion of legitimation: any justification of an act or a requirement is labeled by them legitimation. The third is that van Leeuwen does not clearly differentiate between the construction of legitimacy and the construction of authority in discourse. Indeed, for him, legitimation answers the question of why we must do something and do it in a certain way (2007: 93). However, to use Charaudeau's already quoted formulation, legitimation refers to the right to say and do; the ability to make the audience comply voluntarily, namely, to provide it with reasons to do something in a certain way, is a matter of authority. This relative indifference also characterizes Rojo and van Dijk's article (1997: 553).

- 30 The fact that van Leeuwen conflates the two notions necessarily affects his categorization. He proposes four categories: authorization (in the sense of recourse to authority), moral evaluation, rationalization (in the sense of providing reasons) and mythopoesis (or persuasion by exemplary narratives). It follows from the indistinction between legitimacy and authority that some of the discursive procedures adopted for legitimation are in fact procedures for building authority. Take the authorization, or recourse to the authority of a person who holds power—political or, in van Leeuwen's example, school or family. For example: “Magnus sat down. Because the teacher said they had to”; or the answer to the question “why do I have to do this?”: “because Dr. Juan says so” (*ibid.*: 94-95). It is actually an argument *ad verecundiam* where the opinion of an authority is used as evidence to support the validity of an instruction, thus calling for a blind compliance for what the addressee is asked to do. An exterior authority is exempting the subject from examining the question himself or herself (authority construction); this exterior authority is conferred upon the doctor or the teacher by his or her recognized status, his or her professional legitimacy: authority leans on legitimacy but is not to be dissolved in it.
- 31 While aspiring to continue the pioneering work of the CDA, we situate our analysis within the framework of the theory of argumentation in discourse developed in the French field (Amossy 2021 [2000]). We will try to elaborate an approach distinguishing legitimacy and authority, attentive like the CDA to their modes of verbal construction and to their socio-political issues. For lack of space, we will illustrate (rather than analyze) the quotations very briefly, drawing on the first speeches on the coronavirus delivered by democratic leaders faced with the need to announce extraordinary, and unpopular, measures to fight the pandemic.

## 3.2. Towards an analysis of the verbal process of legitimation

### 3.2.1. Legitimation as a manifestation of institutional legitimacy

- 32 The most basic level is that of the institutional legitimacy enjoyed by the leader. Even when this institutional legitimacy is given from the outside by the status legally

conferred on the elected representative, the individual enthroned by the institution must ensure that it comes through in his or her speech. To achieve this result, s/he must display discursively all the marks that bear witness to his or her high functions within a scenography (a script) that can vary according to circumstances.

33 **—The pomp that surrounds the speaker and that is linked to the political culture of the country:**

34 Visual signs – gilding, flags, etc. as is the case, for example, with Macron and Merkel in their solemn address to the nation.

35 **—The type of discourse selected, more or less official and ceremonial:**

36 The prime-time address on television, the press conference, but also the frequency of the head of state's appearances in times of crisis (for example, Netanyahu in Israel making daily speeches on the 8 p.m. TV news).

37 **—Lexical choices and their allegiance to phraseology:**

38 The speaker “elaborates on the basis of a few units immediately available a discursive production rather unoriginal, but in accordance with what he must say and write given his position” (Krieg-Planque 2012: 102-103; my translation). It includes forms of opening and closing, clichés, formulas, conventional themes that manifest the official character of the discourse, adapted to the circumstances.

39 **—The use of the exclusive “we”:**

40 “Me” + government bodies vs “you”.

41 **—The mention of the institutional bodies consulted and of democratic consensus:**

42 Great Britain, B. Johnson (12.3.2020), “I’ve just chaired a meeting of the government’s emergency committee including ministers from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland,” Spain, 14.3.2020, Pedro Sanchez: *Comparezco para dar cuenta del Consejo de Ministros extraordinario en el que hemos aprobado el ya anunciado Estado de Alarma y las medidas que este implica para hacer frente al coronavirus, al COVID-19* (“I am appearing to report on the extraordinary Council of Ministers in which we have approved the already announced state of alarm and the measures that this implies to face the coronavirus, COVID-19”); France, E. Macron, 12.3.2021: “I also asked the Prime Minister, he did it again this morning, to consult widely all the political families, and they expressed the same will.” The result is a clearing of any trace of disagreement, and an insistence on unity as the result and mark of a democratic agreement (to the detriment of the value of deliberation and the agonistic confrontation of points of view).

43 **—The use of the “I” who makes use of his/her prerogatives:**

44 Russia, Vladimir Putin, 25.3.2020: “I declare next week unemployed, with continued salary;” E. Macron, 16.3.2021: “That's why, after having consulted, listened to the experts, to the people and in conscience, I have decided to further strengthen the measures.”

### 3.2.2. Legitimation by adapting to the values of democracy

45 In addition to the institutional dimension that the leader displays in his or her address, his/her legitimacy depends on the conformity of the discourse and decisions to a set of values that in the context of our examples are global values, but also democratic values.

46 **—The concern for the general good:**

47 The first duty of the legitimate leader is to look after the general good, especially in times of crisis. Swedish PM Stefan Löfven, 22.3.2020: *Jag som statsminister, den regering jag leder, kommer fatta varje beslut som krävs för att skydda så ånga människors liv, hälsa och jobb som det bara går* (“I myself as Prime Minister, and the government I lead, will take all necessary decisions to protect life, the health and employment of as many people as possible”); Great Britain, Boris Johnson, 3.3.2020: “Keeping the country safe is the government’s overriding priority;” Italy, Conte: *Lo scopo è quello di tutelare il bene della salute degli italiani, il bene che ci sta più a cuore, quello che nella gerarchia dei valori costituzionali è sicuramente al primo posto* (“The objective is to protect the health of Italians, the most important good for us, the one that certainly occupies the first place in the hierarchy of constitutional values”).

48 **—The protection of the most vulnerable:**

49 A sacred ethical value that the government must respect is the defense and protection of the weakest. E. Macron, 12.3.2020: “In this context, the urgency is to protect our most vulnerable compatriots;” Boris Johnson, 12.3.2020: “The most important task will be to protect our elderly and most vulnerable people during the peak weeks when there is the maximum risk of exposure to the disease.”

50 **—Respect for democratic values:**

51 The leader draws his or her legitimacy from the respect of democratic values. However, the situation imposes a problematic limitation on the exercise of fundamental rights. The restrictions imposed in times of pandemic infringe on freedom: individual freedoms, freedom of assembly (Article 20 of the Declaration of Human Rights), freedom to organize one’s private and family life, etc. In the first speeches of the heads of state on the coronavirus, the issue of democracy and the rights it confers is not necessarily addressed. The very fact of raising the question of infringements of democratic values risks raising doubts that in the circumstances one endeavors to repress. Despite the danger, some choose to deal directly with the relationship to democracy in the management of the health crisis.

52 This is what leaders such as Angela Merkel, the German Chancellor, and the President of Portugal, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, are doing in the form of meta-discourses, declaring: *É também um sinal democrático. Democrático, pela convergência dos vários poderes do Estado. Democrático, porque é a Democracia a usar os meios excecionais que ela própria prevê para tempos de gravidade excepcional. Não é uma interrupção da Democracia. É a Democracia a tentar impedir uma interrupção irreparável na vida das pessoas* (“It is also a democratic sign. Democratic because of the convergence of the various powers of the State. Democratic, because it is Democracy using the exceptional means that it itself provides for times of exceptional gravity. It is not an interruption of Democracy. It is Democracy trying to prevent an irreparable interruption in people’s lives.” Alberto Fernandez in Argentina, announcing a new curfew measure from midnight, wishes to clarify both the severity of the decision and its democratic character (20.3.2020): *la realidad es que esta es una medida excepcional, que dictamos en un momento excepcional, pero absolutamente dentro del marco de lo que la democracia permite* (“the reality is that this is an exceptional measure, which we dictate at an exceptional moment, but absolutely within the framework of what democracy allows”).

53 **—The justification by the exceptional nature of the situation:**

- 54 The nature of the crisis calls for derogations from the principles applied in normal times, derogations provided for by the democratic system. The metaphor of war, brandished by various leaders including E. Macron, reflects this well: it explains that the state of emergency, which is necessary when the nation is under attack, cannot be based on routine behavior; it legitimizes the extraordinary measures taken by the head of state within the framework of the constitution.

### 3.2.3. Legitimation by proximity to the audience

- 55 The marks of proximity ensure the recognition of the representativeness of the leader, who partially abandons a traditional position of overhang thanks to certain discursive procedures—the use of personal pronouns, and more particularly of the inclusive “we” and of “you”, the possible use of colloquial expressions, verbal marks of identification or even empathy, the theme of a shared fate, etc. Thus Merkel (18.3.2020) declares: *Natürlich ist jeder von uns in solch einer Situation voller Fragen und voller Sorgen, wie es weitergeht* (“Of course, each of us has many questions and concerns in a situation like this, about the days ahead”).

## 3.3. Towards an analysis of the discursive construction of authority

- 56 What about the construction of authority? As we have seen, the authority of the ruler held to be legitimate depends on his or her credibility in a double form—that which is attached to his or her words, and that which is attached to his or her person. It is therefore the justification of the measures intended to make them credible and the verbal modalities of the leader’s self-presentation that must be analyzed closely.

### 3.3.1. The authority of the statements

- 57 It derives “its probability or veracity [...] not directly from the empirical world”—thus from knowledge derived from the speaker’s experience—“nor from logic (from the informal logic that formalizes life experience), but from the quality of a source” (Angenot 2013: 5): in this case, the politician’s inescapable recourse to expert opinion.
- 58 The measures against the coronavirus that might at first sight seem aberrant appear plausible as soon as they are based on scientific reasoning transmitted to decision-makers. It should be emphasized that the scientists consulted, and even the best epidemiologists, are themselves faced with a new phenomenon that they know little about; they have no certainty about the effectiveness of the various prevention measures. At the same time, the delegated scientific knowledge on which a leader intends to base his authority must not appear to be questionable if it is to elicit consent to severe preventive measures. It is not surprising, therefore, that in most of the early speeches, the opinion of experts whose knowledge and reputation are highlighted is presented as unanimous and indisputable, without mention of prior discussions or possible disagreements (in contrast to the controversies that will later be picked up by the media).
- 59 —**The pragmatic argument or the argument from the consequences:**
- 60 If one does A’, a positive (negative) consequence will follow; therefore, one should (should not) do A’ (Walton, Reed and Macagno 2008) – with the critical question: how plausible is it that these consequences will happen and what evidence supports this

claim? Clearly, the decision to take, or not to take, certain measures to combat the pandemic is based on the practical consequences of the choices made in relation to the stated goals (such as: containing the pandemic until treatments and vaccines are found, preventing hospital overcrowding, saving lives). Of course, the pragmatic argument and the argument from authority can intersect and reinforce each other.

61 **—Value-based argumentation:**

62 In addition to those values that are invoked to legitimize the speaker, values are put forward to influence the addressee. Indeed, the justification is not always purely practical, it can also be based on obedience to the values that the audience is anxious to respect and to implement. Therefore, the consequences of a choice are also measured in terms of the values it promotes (Fairclough and Fairclough 2012: 45): for example, obedience to restrictive measures that aim at a practical goal also realizes the values of responsibility and solidarity that are crucial for the collectivity. The Swedish PM joins personal sacrifice and the duty of compassion towards the weakest (22.3.2020), presented in the light of moral duty: “Now we all have a great personal responsibility. There are some critical moments in life when you must make sacrifices, not only for your own good, but also for those around you, for your fellow human beings and for our country. That time is now. That day has come. And it is everyone’s duty.”

63 **—The hierarchy of values (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969):**

64 Some values seem more important than others, and it is by sorting them in order of importance that we can decide in case of conflict which one should be promoted. For example, in times of health crisis, the supreme value of human life may take precedence over freedom. In Brazil, President Bolsonaro is weighing the danger to the health of Brazilians and the threat to the economy of a country where a large part of the population lives in great precariousness—and refuses to harm the economy.

### 3.3.2. The authority of the person

65 Moreover, an essential level of the construction of the discursive authority resides in the credibility of the person of the one who edicts the measures. It is established from:

66 **—The prior *ethos* (Amossy 2010)**

67 or potential credit enjoyed by the leader. It is possible to see in context what his or her reputation is when addressing the nation, and what possibly conflicting images of him or her are circulating in the public arena. If the reputation is not yet firmly established, the new head of state must redouble his or her efforts to project a credible and trustworthy image. This is the case, for example, with Belgian PM Sophie Wilmès, who heads an *ad hoc* government appointed at a time of severe political crisis only to manage the pandemic; or with recently elected heads of state, such as Argentine President Alberto Fernandez, who did not take office until December 10, 2019. In contrast, a head of government may enjoy a potential of credit, such as the Swedish or PM or the German Chancellor.

68 **—Re-elaborating one’s *ethos***

69 When the political person is discredited due to circumstances (President Macron following the Yellow Vests movement, Israeli PM Netanyahu indicted for fraud who addresses a public a large part of which demands his resignation), it can become a real image repair process.



70 —A discursive construction of *ethos*

71 *i.e.* a positive self-image (reasonable, moral and benevolent) through the use of appropriate discursive and argumentative means, and the individual style of the speaker in what it allows the personality to shine through—*e.g.* the ability to use clear and simple verbal modalities, to give an impression of transparency and sincerity, etc.

### 3.4. Interdiscursive weaving and positioning in the field

72 Authority is also constructed in the way the speech fits into the overall inter-discourse where it reacts to the other's speech, tries to anticipate it, works to thwart possible objections, and can sometimes only be posed in opposition. This is true of the relationship of the Covid-19 address to the addresses of other heads of state in the same circumstances, which reinforce the authority of the speaker. This is also true for the way it thwarts the authority of other political parties and rival factions, to which it responds implicitly (especially when an impression of unity is in order, which is usually the case) or explicitly (when it is important to counter opponents, as in Bolsonaro's case, for example). This is why the authority of the speaker is built in the circulation of discourses. It presupposes that the analyst situates the leader's speech in its interdiscursive web (as theorized, for example, by C. Scaccia in her analysis of Conte in Italy, in this special issue).

73 Let us add that authority is closely related to the positioning of the leader on the political chessboard. It is not only a question of the politician exploiting his or her institutional status, but also of (re)positioning himself or herself in relation to competing politicians and parties, *i.e.* of giving oneself advantages that will subsequently play in one's favor. This is an objective that links authority and power position, and as such cannot be explicitly admitted by the politician. However, it is well known that the results of each speech are the subject of polls in which the popularity of the leader is measured, and that his or her position in relation to his/her competitors is constantly re-evaluated during the crisis. Sometimes the speech in a moment of acute crisis is even exploited for political purposes—for example, B. Netanyahu, unable to form a government on his own after the last elections, is working to involve the party of his rival, Benny Gantz, in a national unity government under his aegis (as A. Friedman shows in her analysis in this issue). In all cases, we cannot ignore the variable ways in which the sanitary and the political are intertwined in the discourses on Covid-19, and the way in which the leader can exploit his or her construction of legitimacy and authority to his or her own advantage (or even instrumentalize it to reinforce authoritarian power, as R. Wodak shows in the case of Hungary).

### Provisional conclusion

74 The indications presented here offer the rudiments of an analysis that draws on the tools of both DA and argumentation theories. It goes without saying that each discursive and argumentative procedure must be studied with the specific tools provided by these two fields of knowledge. Thus, for instance, the way in which proximity marks should be identified will benefit from recent works on the subject, the question of value-based argumentation in its various forms will find answers in the works of Koren (2019) or Guerrini (2019), the numerous discursive procedures studied



by Roja and van Dijk or by van Leeuwen and/or Wodak will find a place of choice in this framework, the verbal procedures exposed in *Argumentation in Discourse* (Amossy 2021 [2000]) will receive a privileged field of application here. These discursive and argumentative procedures are not particular to the process of legitimation and authority construction: they are part of a global arsenal. It is the way in which this process mobilizes them to achieve its ends that is the focus of our attention here. We have tried to show this from a case study (the beginning of the coronavirus crisis) where the legitimation of measures that can seem liberticidal, and the construction of an authority that must win the assent of citizens to a dramatic change in their way of life, present unusual difficulties.

- 75 Of course, it is not just about providing a toolbox. The analysis of the texts in situation allows us to understand the degree of uniformity of the speeches aimed at the same objective, but also the differences that emerge according to the political situation, the relationship of the citizens to the governmental authorities and to the leader of the moment, the socio-political imaginary of the country in question, and the inter-discourse that circulates there. If it can globally identify a “rhetoric of the coronavirus,” the analysis also calls for exploring the singularity of each case, and for searching for the social and political stakes of speeches that can only be grasped in context, within their interdiscursive framework.
- 76 To identify these issues and to see how they are pursued in the field, a preliminary synthesis on political legitimacy and authority was necessary. This focus, which draws on a range of disciplines (political science, sociology, DA, argumentation), allows us to better understand the distinction between recognition of legitimacy and obedience to authority. Legitimacy is rooted in the legality of the acquisition and exercise of power, but also in the justification of power relations in terms of beliefs and values; it must be explicitly recognized in order to be imposed. Authority is the capacity to provoke obedience without coercion; it is based on legitimacy but requires, to be accepted and therefore efficient, that the speaker constructs an *ethos* endowed with an additional credibility that inspires confidence in the framework of an asymmetrical relationship. It also calls for a justification of requests and instructions that persuades of their plausibility and appropriateness.
- 77 Because of their close interrelationship, the notions of political legitimacy and authority are constantly intertwined in texts; the discursive and argumentative procedures that allow them to be constructed (in terms of *ethos* and justification) often overlap in the way they are put into words, so much so that the same discursive segment can sometimes simultaneously perform the work of legitimation and the verbal construction of authority. It is nonetheless important to grasp what distinguishes them, and to manage to differentiate them, without confusing them with power. This is what we have tried to do here, while providing a first overview of the discursive and argumentative processes likely to legitimize the leader, and of those that construct his or her authority as well as the authority of the announced measures.

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## NOTES

1. <https://www.dictionnaire-juridique.com/definition/legitimite.php>
2. <http://www.dicopart.fr/en/dico/legitimite>
3. It is on this basis that Iețu-Fairclough (2008) conducts an interesting argumentative analysis of Basescu's (the Romanian President threatened with impeachment) speech to the people.
4. This legitimacy of proximity is, in the context of our work, limited to verbal behaviors (and does not extend to the wide range of its contemporary political manifestations).
5. We would however want to point out that the Discourse analyst who is apparently outside the field of argumentation indirectly takes it into account within a discursive typology of justifications and a very fine analysis that sometimes mobilize elements of rhetorical argumentation without resorting to its taxonomy. Moreover, it is important to note that Wodak's later texts intend to integrate methods borrowed from argumentation, and more particularly the use of *topoi* which she defines as content-related argumentative schemes serving as warrants of the legitimization procedures (2018: 33).

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## ABSTRACTS

This article examines the construction of political legitimacy and authority in the discourses of democratic leaders by attempting to distinguish between two often confused notions, and to identify the discursive and argumentative procedures that put them in place. It takes stock of a body of work devoted to the subject and proposes an original approach that emphasizes the centrality of argumentation in the process of legitimation and the construction of a leader's authority. Using the example of the first speeches of the heads of state at the time of the Covid-19 crisis, it proposes an analytical framework that can account for discursive and argumentative operations and their socio-political stakes in context.

Cet article examine la construction de la légitimité et de l'autorité politiques dans les discours des dirigeants démocratiques en tentant de distinguer deux notions souvent confondues, et de repérer les procédures discursives et argumentatives qui les mettent en place. Il fait le point sur un ensemble de travaux consacrés au sujet, et propose une approche originale qui souligne la centralité de l'argumentation dans le processus de légitimation et la construction d'autorité du leader. À partir de l'exemple des premières allocutions des chefs d'État au moment de la crise de la Covid-19, il propose une grille d'analyse susceptible de rendre compte des fonctionnements discursifs et de leurs enjeux socio-politiques en contexte.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** argumentation, autorité, Covid-19, discours politique, légitimation

**Keywords:** argumentation, authority, Covid-19, legitimation, political discourse

## AUTHOR

RUTH AMOSSY

Tel Aviv University, ADARR